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Melodrama on a Mission: Latter-Day Saint Film and the Melodramatic Mode

Abstract

This article examines how the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormon Church) makes use of the melodramatic mode in creating short and feature length films for both insider and outsider consumption. The argument is made that the melodramatic mode gives the LDS Church a particularly meaningful tool for accomplishing three key goals: to encourage conversion or re-conversion by provoking tears and pathos, to work out social issues, and to create and maintain a certain identity for the Church as victim-hero. As such, the melodramatic mode is a means for identity formation and community building, significant in a religious context outside the confines of traditional scholarly discourse on Hollywood melodrama.

Keywords

Latter-day Saints, Mormon, film, melodrama

Author Notes

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Viewers who have seen one of the impeccably produced “And I’m a Mormon” advertisements put out by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in recent times will not find it surprising to learn that the LDS Church has a flourishing Media Services Department. What many non-members may not realize, however, is that the Church is not only interested in creating glossy proselytizing tools, but in making short and feature-length films for both insider and outsider consumption. Indeed, the Church operates its own motion picture studio and is constantly working on various productions, from Bible story retellings to narratives about Church history to faith-promoting fictional features. These films are used in a range of contexts. While many of the works will never reach a wide audience outside the Church, these films serve as an important means for identity negotiation and community building. Some members criticize the Church’s films for being too sappy or sentimental, too melodramatic. In this article, I argue that the melodramatic mode is in fact an essential component of LDS films, that melodrama is a significant means towards various ends.

Scholarly (and even popular) treatments of melodrama in film are rife with discussions of excess, tears, coincidence, pathos, and desire. But they are also peppered with references to Joan Crawford, Lana Turner's hair, Douglas Sirk films, lavish sets and elaborate costumes: in short, Hollywood. Yet Hollywood does not maintain a monopoly on melodrama, particularly when melodrama is seen as a mode rather than a genre. As film scholars John Mercer and Martin

Shingler have pointed out, viewing melodrama as a modality “facilitates the consideration of the ways in which a melodramatic sensibility can manifest itself across a range of texts and genres” and “makes it possible to consider a range of films produced outside the mainstream of Hollywood film production and consider the extent to which melodramatic aesthetics and techniques are deployed to convey emotional conflicts.”¹ If we do not limit melodrama to the confines of a specific genre, but rather see it as a sensibility which can inform any type of film, we can then further explore how melodrama functions in American culture.

In this article, I consider how melodrama functions as a mode outside of Hollywood by looking at the way the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints uses melodrama in their official film productions. The melodramatic mode is integral to the LDS film, as LDS filmmakers are using it in important ways as they create films with particular moral messages: to encourage conversion or re-conversion by provoking tears and pathos, to work out social issues, and to create and maintain a certain identity for the Church as victim-hero. Before turning to how and why the LDS Church uses melodrama in its films, I will first briefly consider the definition of the melodramatic mode and also provide a background for looking at LDS film.

Defining Melodrama

“Melodrama” is a slippery term, easy to use, but much harder to understand. Film scholars have debated what the defining constituents of melodrama are for years, without really coming to any definite conclusions. Yet in order to discuss melodrama, or to examine how melodrama might function for a group such as the LDS Church, we must attempt to create a working definition.

I propose to use the following three characteristics as the defining markers of the melodramatic mode: an ideal of noble suffering, usually undergone by a victim-hero; an understanding of the fragility of time as seen in moments of coincidence, ‘just-in-time,’ and ‘too-late;’ and a reliance on the gap between the knowledge of the characters and the audience. These three elements then work together to produce moments of excess and/or pathos, and to therefore provoke deep emotion and often tears.² A sharply drawn moral vision underlies all of these elements and motivates the *need* for the provocation of emotion. Any film which incorporates these features, no matter the genre or style, can be considered as operating at least in part under a melodramatic modality.

This definition naturally relies heavily on the work of other film scholars. Mary Ann Doane, writing about pathos in the films of Todd Haynes, suggests that the production of pathos requires suffering, that “the etymology of pathos insists that suffering is its critical emotion, that it concerns not just an excess emotion but

one that hurts, that is inextricable from pain.”³ Linda Williams emphasizes the importance of the victim-hero in her definition of the melodramatic mode, stating that “Melodrama focuses on victim-heroes and on recognizing their virtue.”⁴ According to Williams, this recognition of virtue then allows for the emergence of moral legibility. Reading Doane and Williams together, then, we can suggest that for the moral vision to emerge, pathos must be evoked, and suffering must be present for that evocation to occur. Moreover, the one who suffers must present some hope of overcoming the suffering (though not necessarily succeed at doing so) by means of heroic virtue.

Steve Neale observes that melodrama depends on “chance happenings, coincidences, missed meetings, sudden conversions, last-minute rescues and revelations, *deus ex machina* endings.”⁵ He insists that timing is crucial to the production of tears in melodrama, or rather that *delays* are crucial – that there must always be the possibility of an important event happening too late.⁶ Williams also discusses timing in her definition of melodrama, saying that “a give and take of ‘too late’ and ‘in the nick of time’” creates a dialectic between pathos and action.⁷ Success is only moving because it entails the possibility of failure; the triumph over suffering can only be a victory if the suffering might have *not* been overcome. And moments of chance, when free will and choice are suspended by the workings of a powerful Destiny, are equally moving, because such moments are equally fragile. Furthermore, failure must also be seen as

precarious – it must not be inevitable, but rather open to the possibility of success. As Neale says, failure and suffering must exist in a state of “if-only,” wherein the audience can see in those moments of anguish the fleeting opportunity for joy.

For the audience to feel the pricks and pains of the afflictions of victim-heroes, to sense the vulnerability of success and failure, they must be privileged in their knowledge – privileged above and beyond the characters within a text, that is. Neale sees this “production of discrepancies between the knowledge and point of view of the spectator and the knowledge and point of view of the characters” as an essential component of melodrama.⁸ The audience must know things the characters cannot know, see things they cannot see. Coincidences of timing can only become evident and have emotional effect if the audience can see both possibilities of success and failure – but the characters cannot.

The noble suffering of a victim-hero, the fragile nature of time, and the gap between audience and character knowledge come together for the purpose of moving an audience - moving that audience in the direction of a certain moral vision. For many melodramatic films in Hollywood, that moral vision is a secular, social one. Of course, for a religious institution such as the LDS Church, the moral vision has a particularly religious character. I will now turn to a short discussion of the history and context of LDS film, in order to illuminate the LDS moral vision and set the stage for discussing LDS films as melodrama.

LDS Film: History and Context

LDS Church films have a long history, going back to the silent era.⁹ Between 1916 and 1929, Shirley and Chester Clawson, under the approval of Church President Joseph F. Smith, produced several silent film recordings of church events and leaders. In the 1940s and 1950s, the Church actively worked to supply 16mm projectors to as many wards as possible.¹⁰ Under President David O. McKay, the Church created the motion picture production department at Brigham Young University (BYU) in 1953 – a rarity at that time. The department of motion picture production eventually evolved into the LDS Motion Picture Studio. During the 1970s, various departments within the Church (such as the Church Educational System) developed their own small film production units. In 1989, all the smaller departments came together with the larger LDS Motion Picture Studio to form the Church Audio/Visual Department. Currently, the Church Audio/Visual Department produces dozens of short films for the Church each year, as well as the occasional full-length film. This film production is in addition to having responsibilities connected to Mormon Tabernacle Choir broadcasts, the Church internet sites, and other media used in the Church.

An important consideration to note when discussing these films is that despite the longstanding structure of LDS film production, “star text,” so often a factor in Hollywood productions, plays an almost non-existent role in LDS

films.¹¹ Typically, the films involve the work of many talented people, but the individual contributions are subsumed by the purpose of the films: the furthering of the work of the Church. Church films only occasionally have credits; often, in order to find out the names of actors, cinematographers, or directors, one has to actively search out that information.

Most of the actors featured in these films have no other film credits; a few do participate in other Church films or even sporadically in mainstream films or television. Directors, composers, and cinematographers often work on repeated Church productions or independent films, but not in Hollywood. Currently, only active Latter-day Saints with temple recommends are allowed to act in Church films, though this was not always the case. For instance, Kathleen Beller, a non-Mormon who played lead character Eliza Williams in *Legacy* (Kieth Merrill, 1990), also played Kirby Anders on the television show *Dynasty*, and received a Best Supporting Actress Golden Globe nomination for her work in the film *Promises in the Dark* (Jerome Hellman, 1979). Latter-day Saint Kieth Merrill, who directed *Mr. Krueger's Christmas* (1980), *Legacy*, and other Church films, won an Academy Award for his feature length documentary *The Great American Cowboy* (1973). Occasionally an actor or director has some “crossover” success.

Greg Hansen, a Latter-day Saint composer who has scored over eighty films (for both the LDS Church and for other clients), has described the status of “star text” in official Church films with the following statement:

In Hollywood, a filmmaker lives and dies by his credits. To be making films for the Church, one must be willing to be completely dedicated, creative, a master of the craft, able to let go of all personal artistic ownership of their work to higher powers for adaptation or change, and do so without credit or even comparable compensation to that of the outside industry. He must be willing to be a facilitator of the Spirit – a vehicle to give form to principles of the gospel.¹²

While for many Hollywood films, star text adds another dimension to the melodrama, for LDS Church films, too much recognizable star text might hamper the emotional (and spiritual) impact. One obvious exception to this rule is the use of popular actor Jimmy Stewart in *Mr. Krueger's Christmas* – because the Church intended that film to be shown on broadcast television, and they wanted to reach a wide audience with a recognizable non-LDS (but LDS-friendly) presence, they sought out the well-known and well-liked Stewart to play the title role.¹³

Another important consideration to take into account is who is watching LDS films, and in what contexts. Unsurprisingly, the primary audience for most Church productions is the Church itself. Sunday School teachers use videos or DVDs of the films in their lessons. Many of the films are available for purchase on the Church's website for fairly cheaply (\$3-7 apiece, typically), and members of the Church often own personal copies of the films for use at home. The Church

also has numerous visitors' centers throughout the world at locations associated either with Church historical sites or temples which often show one or more of the films. The Legacy Theater in the Joseph Smith Memorial Building on Temple Square in Salt Lake City has in recent years become a venue for showing a select group of films created particularly for the 70 millimeter format: *Legacy*, *The Testaments: Of One Fold and One Shepherd* (Kieth Merrill, 2000), and the current film *Joseph Smith: The Prophet of the Restoration* (T.C. Christensen and Gary Cook, 2005). Members and non-members alike can attend the showings of films at the Legacy Theater and the visitors' centers free of charge.

And certainly, the Church wants non-members to see the films. Some of the films are clearly produced and designed as missionary tools. The Church runs advertisements on television and radio all over the country offering both free copies of *The Book of Mormon* and often free copies of certain Church films, such as *Mr. Krueger's Christmas* and *Together Forever* (Michael McClean, 1988). As stated, *Mr. Krueger's Christmas* debuted on television, and other Church films have at various points run on television. Additionally, almost all of the films the Church creates and sells or distributes are available in numerous languages, making them accessible to people around the world.

LDS film covers a wide range of genres and styles. Some, like *Legacy*, are sweeping historical epics. Others are simple cinematic retellings of classic stories, such as *The Last Leaf* (David Anspaugh, 1983) and *The Gift* (Douglas G. Johnson,

1977). Some films, like *Mr. Krueger's Christmas* and *The Mailbox* (David K. Jacobs, 1977), are entirely fictional. Many of the Church films, though, are at least based on true stories or actual events – for example, *The Mountain of the Lord* (Peter N. Johnson, 1993) or *Pioneers in Petticoats* (Judge Whitaker, 1969). Many are structured as episodic narratives, while others take on the character of a documentary. Most are short by Hollywood standards, running less than an hour, though a few are full-length features. Often the films do not include specifically LDS content – many simply emphasize certain themes within the LDS tradition which might also be relevant to those outside (love, family, kindness, etc). Certainly, not all LDS films could be termed as exclusively "melodramatic," though most are clearly informed by a melodramatic mode, the reasons for which I will now turn to discussing.

Three Functions of Melodrama in LDS Films

As stated earlier, there are three key ways in which the LDS Church uses the melodramatic mode in its films: to encourage conversion or re-conversion by provoking tears and pathos, to work out tensions between the Church and the larger society, and to create and maintain a certain identity for the Church as victim-hero. I will take up each of these usages in turn, illustrating them with examples of specific LDS films made over the last fifty years. Under each

function, the films use the key aspects of the melodramatic mode I have identified (the noble suffering of a victim-hero, coincidence and delay, and audience/character knowledge discrepancies) to produce moments of excess and/or pathos in light of the LDS moral vision. Each film I examine conveys a range of moral messages; some also make an attempt to depict history in a certain light. Particular religious values and a unique religious worldview are expressed through the films. The melodramatic mode serves to underscore these messages to serve the three goals I examine.

Conversion through Tears

Near the end of *The Book of Mormon*, in the tenth chapter of the Book of Moroni, the fourth verse reads: “And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.”¹⁴ And what will that manifestation be like? According to a revelation Joseph Smith professed to have received from God: “Your bosom shall burn within you . . . you shall feel that it is right.”¹⁵

Latter-day Saint discourse is replete with images of a model of conversion which relies on deep emotional feelings being interpreted as evidence of the reception of divinely inspired messages. This model is not unique; many groups, religious or otherwise, rely on intense emotions to play a role in the recruitment and maintenance of membership. Exceptionality is not the issue, however – the point is simply that for the LDS Church, such a model is vital. Indeed, it is impossible to overstate the importance of this type of conversion in the LDS tradition. For Latter-day Saints, the emotional experience and the spiritual experience are persistently collapsed into one another.

All of the films the LDS Church produces are meant to encourage audiences to “feel the Spirit.” This is part of the moral vision which underlies LDS film. If the provocation of tears and the stirring of great emotion are key goals of LDS film, and the provocation of tears and the stirring of great emotion are the result of the primary elements of melodrama, then it makes sense for the LDS Church to use melodrama in its films. Coincidences and delays, discrepancies in audience knowledge and character knowledge, and suffering all play pivotal roles in LDS films specifically because of their potential ability to produce deep emotion in audiences – deep emotion which might lead to or (more cynically) be interpreted as a spiritual experience.



Figure 1: Lethe chats with the friendly mailman in The Mailbox (1977).

For instance, the “particularly poignant” moments Steve Neale discusses as resulting from discrepancies in knowledge can be seen in the 1977 short film *The Mailbox*.¹⁶ In *The Mailbox*, an elderly woman, Lethe, anxiously awaits the mail every day, hoping for a letter or card from her children, long since grown and gone [Figure 1]. Lethe lives in a rural area, and must walk down a long driveway to reach her mailbox. Day after day, we see her put on her coat and, walking stick in hand, hobble down the rough path to her mailbox. A young neighbor girl sometimes waits with her for the mail, and the girl asks Lethe why she doesn’t simply go live with her children. Lethe emphatically replies that she loves her home – her father built it, her husband renovated it, her children were born there.

Eventually we see the mother of the neighbor girl speaking on the telephone with one of Lethe's daughters. We discover that her children have decided to put Lethe in a retirement facility so they no longer have to concern themselves with her care. The neighbor tries to talk Lethe's daughter out of this course of action, but the daughter insists, saying she will "write Mother a letter" explaining the situation. Meanwhile, Lethe continues going to the mailbox, disappointed each and every time.

It is at this moment the divergence in knowledge comes into play. We, the audience, know that soon Lethe's desire will be fulfilled; a letter will arrive. Yet we also know the contents of the letter will devastate her. Her suffering will not be alleviated, but worsened. We are helpless to interfere.

On the day the letter arrives, Lethe falls asleep, and misses the mailman. When she awakes with a start and realizes she is late, she hurriedly puts on coat and gloves and walks in the snow to her mailbox. At first she does not see the letter; then, finally, she feels it with her hand. Because of her haste to get to the box, Lethe forgot her glasses, so she has to wait to open the letter, but she can make out that the letter is from her daughter. Thrilled, Lethe returns to the house as quickly as she is able. Once inside, she fumbles with taking off her coat and finding her glasses. Finally she sits down to open the letter – but just as she puts her letter opener to the corner of the envelope, she stops, clearly in pain. She crushes the letter in her fist and clutches at her chest. Clearly she is suffering a

stroke or heart attack. We see her die in her neighbor's arms, awaiting an ambulance [Figure 2]. Later, when the neighbor is telling Lethe's daughter what happened, we discover that Lethe's last request words were, "The children – tell them I was so happy to get their letter." The daughter breaks down in tears, and the audience must feel compelled to do the same.

Though much of the pathos in the film comes from the discrepancy in knowledge, Lethe's lonely suffering as an innocent but forgotten old woman also plays a role. The music in *The Mailbox* underlines this suffering. A slow, sad song plays recurrently, the words speaking to Lethe's sadness: "Waiting and watching so patiently/for some sign of love from you/Yet I'll never cease to dream/of letters from my family/Maybe today will be/the day of love for me." These words certainly produce an excess of sympathetic feeling for Lethe's situation, and underscore the small but real tragedy the audience knows she will suffer when she receives the letter from her daughter. The film communicates moral messages about the importance of family and the need to respect and care for the elderly through the prompting of these emotions.



Figure 2: Lethe dies in her neighbor's arms, gasping out her last words.

In another example, the film *How Rare a Possession* (Russell Holt, 1987) relies heavily on the fragility of timing to achieve the greatest emotional effect, though discrepancies in audience/character knowledge and suffering come into play as well.¹⁷ The rare and valuable possession the title refers to is the *Book of Mormon*, and the bulk of the film is spent telling the conversion story of an Italian man, Vincenzo di Francesca, at the turn of the century. Francesca begins the story as a young man, devoted to his religion and intent on becoming a minister. He travels to America, and one day discovers a book by chance – a book without a cover or title page [Figure 3]. He reads the book, and begins to incorporate it into his sermons. When the other ministers of his faith hear about his actions, they insist he burn the book and stop preaching about its contents. When Francesca refuses, they revoke his ordination.



Figure 3: In How Rare a Possession (1987), Vincenzo di Francesca comes upon a cover-less Book of Mormon.

That action does not stop Francesca, of course. He serves in World War I and tells his fellow soldiers about the book. He goes to Australia with a friend and disrupts the friend's visit by speaking about the book. Eventually Francesca returns to Italy. In 1930, *twenty years* after he first found the coverless book, he reads the word "Mormon" in a dictionary, realizes his book is the *Book of Mormon* and finds out about the LDS Church. This is a moment audiences have been waiting for since the beginning, since almost any viewer of the film would likely know the book Francesca has been so faithfully carrying with him was the *Book of Mormon*.

Francesca is naturally thrilled at his discovery, and begins writing to various leaders in the church, hoping to be baptized. Two years later, he attempts to rendezvous with a Church elder to receive baptism, but because of fighting in

Sicily, Francesca is unable to get to Naples to meet the elder. Then, Italy declares war on Ethiopia, and Francesca is called up to fight. Once he returns to Italy, Francesca once again writes to Church leaders and asks to be baptized. He receives a letter from them stating that if he meets them in Rome on a certain day they will baptize him, but the letter has been delayed, and arrives too late for him to make the appointment. Soon after World War II breaks out and LDS missionaries are called back from Europe, further delaying Francesca's baptism. After the war is over, he continues writing to Church leaders, hoping to make face-to-face with them before he dies. Finally, in 1951, Francesco is able to receive baptism at the hands of an LDS elder and visit an LDS temple. By this time he is a very old man, and he has only a few years after his baptism to enjoy his long-awaited communion with the Church before his death.

How Rare a Possession thus relies on a forty year span of "chance happenings, coincidences, missed meetings, sudden conversions" – Steve Neale's markers of the melodramatic mode.¹⁸ Di Francesco's suffering (by being cut off from the Church he so wants to join) is entirely dependent on a series of coincidental events. He just happens upon the coverless book, just happens upon the word 'Mormon' in a dictionary, just barely misses meeting the Church representative in 1932. Wars break out almost as if to deliberately halt his progression towards his goal. The constant delays and frustrations, the sense that perhaps it will be too late – that Di Francesco will die an old man, never being

able to meet with other LDS people or receive baptism – produce the deep emotion of the film, which in turn is meant to underscore the great importance of the *Book of Mormon*. As producer Peter Johnson explicitly stated of *How Rare a Possession*, “We want to make a film that will move people so strongly that they’ll never be able to look at the *Book of Mormon* again without realizing the great sacrifice that’s gone into it.”¹⁹

In a third example, *Mr. Krueger’s Christmas* (1980) attempts to evoke tears and promote faith in Christianity through showing the suffering of one lonely old man on Christmas Eve.²⁰ Steve Neale speaks about how melodrama is “full of characters who wish to be loved, who are worthy of love, and whom the spectator therefore wishes to be loved.”²¹ Mr. Krueger is undeniably one of those characters. A simple janitor for an apartment building, Mr. Krueger wanders home on a chilly Christmas Eve, stopping to buy a little table-top Christmas tree. He tries to wish passers-by “Merry Christmas,” but they ignore him. Upon arriving home, he feeds his cat and sits down to listen to Christmas music on his record player. Just then, a small group of carolers pass by and he invites them in. Mr. Krueger wants them to stay and talk awhile, but they leave quickly, and so he decorates his small tree alone. But then two of the carolers return: a little girl and her mother, because the little girl left her mittens. Mr. Krueger returns the mittens, and the little girl invites him to come caroling with them. Her mother repeats the request, and Mr. Krueger gratefully accepts. The film ends with the little girl

telling Mr. Krueger that she loves him, and a voiceover reminding the audience that Christmas is fundamentally about love.

This fairly simple plot is punctuated and complicated with moments of fantasy from Mr. Krueger's imagination. As he walks home alone, for instance, he looks through the window of a suit shop and imagines himself inside, wearing a new suit and accepting season's greetings from the store employees [Figure 4]. When he listens to his record, he imagines himself conducting the entire Mormon Tabernacle Choir, to great acclaim. He also sees himself playing with happy children in the snow. As the carolers are making their way down to his apartment, he imagines that he lives in an elegant home and can receive company graciously.





Figures 4 and 5: In Mr. Krueger's Christmas (1980), Jimmy Stewart plays a lonely man who imagines himself a new life on Christmas Eve.

While he decorates his Christmas tree, he imagines it is an enormous tree in a village square and that he is surrounded by friendly people and dancing ballerinas. Finally, just before the little girl and her mother return for the mittens, Mr. Krueger rearranges his nativity set and imagines himself being present for the birth of Jesus. He kneels reverently and thanks the infant Jesus for always being with him [Figure 5]. These moments (which are certainly worthy of being called moments of excess) serve to emphasize the pathetic situation in which Mr. Krueger actually lives, as well as point out how his situation might be different. Without these moments of fantasy, Mr. Krueger is simply a lonely old janitor, but his imaginings of how he might be more make him truly seem a suffering victim.

All three films have particular LDS messages: the meaning of family and the need to respect and care for the elderly, the value of *The Book of Mormon*, the importance of faith and perseverance, and the significance of love at Christmas. To convey these messages (and thus convince or persuade audiences of their correctness), LDS filmmakers chose melodramatic elements: suffering, coincidence and delay, and gaps in knowledge. These elements are deployed to achieve the maximum emotional effect and thus result in conversion (of non-members) and re-conversion (of members) to the specific messages within the films, as well as to the overall message of the Church.

Melodrama as Mediator: Working Out Social Issues

LDS films also use melodrama to deal with certain social questions, ones which relate to the larger society and perhaps cannot be easily dealt with. David N. Rodowick, using the domestic Hollywood melodramas of the 1950s as case studies, has suggested that melodrama is often used in an effort to work out larger social issues. He proposes that melodrama offers an arena for displacing contradictions within a dominant ideology, allowing one set of problems to be worked out almost in proxy for another.²²

The short film *Pioneers in Petticoats* came out in 1969, a year of immense social upheaval.²³ The Church was dealing with concerns about the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, the changing structure of the family, and most especially the role of women. Though Church leaders did speak out directly about such issues, *Pioneers in Petticoats* allowed the Church to displace growing anxieties about the place and responsibilities of women in the 1960s onto an already resolved conflict over women's roles in the Church in the 1860s.

The story of *Pioneers in Petticoats* centers on Abigail Harper, a young LDS girl living in Utah in 1869. When she first hears about the new group for young women in the Church, the Retrenchment Society, she mocks it and insists she will never join. The society does charity work and promotes modest, simple dress for young women. Abigail likes to spend her time visiting friends and she loves to wear expensive, fancy gowns. Despite her protests, her father prevails upon her to not only join the Retrenchment Society, but become the leader of the society in her ward.

Eventually, Abigail's parents leave town for a weekend, and she is left to her own devices. She decides to pull out of hiding a frivolous dress and wear it to a Church dance. The dress has many ruffles, a low neckline, and short sleeves. The other people at the dance are scandalized. When her dancing partner accidentally steps on one of her ruffles and tears her dress, Abigail gets angry. She leaves the dance and in due course falls in with a group of wayward youth

going to the local dance hall. One of these local “rebels” is a girl named Nellie, whose father is LDS but who has fallen away from the Church herself. Once Abigail and Nellie’s friends arrive at the dance hall and sit down to drink, Abigail quickly begins to feel uncomfortable and nervous [Figure 6]. When she decides to leave, a stranger offers to escort her home, because Nellie’s friends have no interest in leaving yet.

Once they get to her home, however, the stranger, who has found out her parents are gone, attacks her – rape his clear purpose. Abigail is saved just in time through the intervention of Nellie and her boyfriend, who have followed her home because Nellie suspected the stranger might have less than honorable intentions. After Abigail’s ordeal, she tearfully begs the other members of her ward’s Retrenchment Society to forgive her indecent behavior and accept her as their president again. Hesitant and suspicious, the other girls intend to vote Abigail out of office. But Nellie arrives at their meeting at the last moment and speaks forcefully about Abigail’s innocence and her good example. She pleads with the other girls to forgive Abigail, and eventually they agree. Abigail cries, and all the girls come together and embrace. The film ends with Abigail setting off for a Church conference in Salt Lake City, with the girls of the Retrenchment Society waving goodbye, cheerful and supportive.



Figure 6: In her white, ruffled dress, Abigail fits in at the local dance hall – but she feels too uncomfortable to stay.

At the most basic level, *Pioneers in Petticoats* is simply a fictionalized account of the origins of the LDS Young Women's program in the early Church's Retrenchment Society. In light of the historical situation in which the film was made, however, it is also clearly a statement and reminder about what the Church expects of LDS women in the 20th century: modest dress, demure behavior, and fulfillment through domestic work. These points are driven home by the melodramatic moments of the film: the suffering (albeit short-lived) Abigail must endure, first at the hands of her would-be rapist and second at the hands of her fellow Retrenchment Society members, in order to emerge as a heroine and the 'just-in-time' rescue of Abigail by Nellie from both the violence of the stranger and the scorn of the other girls. The melodramatic moments serve as reminders that the simple act of choosing to wear a dress with ruffles and a scooped neckline

one night, a decision which the film implies almost necessarily led to other bad choices (such as visiting a dance hall or driving alone with a man), triggered a chain of events which could all too easily have culminated in the harsh consequences of sexual assault and community exclusion. The film thus communicates a message of sexuality morality for women, not only in the past, but in the present.

Another example is the film which has been running for the past seven years at the Legacy Theater in Salt Lake City, *Joseph Smith: Prophet of the Restoration*. Produced and screened during a decade in which the Church has both expanded internationally and received considerable attention in the United States, this biographical – some might say hagiographical – film tells the story of Joseph Smith's life in such a way as to emphasize particular elements of his history over others in order to communicate messages about the current identity of the Church. Melodramatic moments within the film attempt to reorient viewers away from what might be termed a “scholarly” understanding of history and toward a reading of Joseph Smith's life which bolsters the Church's image today.

The film is narrated by a voiceover from the writings of Lucy Mack Smith, Joseph's mother, and is fairly episodic in nature. She recounts his birth and early years briefly before moving to his “First Vision” which began his prophetic ministry. The film depicts Smith finding ancient metal plates and translating them into the Book of Mormon, his organization of the Church in 1830, and the early

days of the Church. Particular emphasis is given to moments of persecution from outsiders, such as an 1832 incident in which a mob tarred and feathered Smith or the 1838 attack on a small Mormon settlement in Missouri, Haun's Mill, in which several Mormons died. The film concludes with Smith's murder in Carthage, IL; the final moments show Brigham Young successfully taking leadership of the community and leading them to the Salt Lake Valley.

The film begins with the statement that "the historical events represented in this story are true and occurred on the American frontier from 1805-1845." Of course, in a film that runs just over an hour, history is edited considerably. The film's creators were producing a compact film meant for faith promotion, not the film version of Richard Bushman's thorough biography *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*. Choices about what to leave out and what to emphasize, particularly through a melodramatic lens, do reflect a concern for "displacing contradictions" in Rodowick's terms.

Two key issues which continue to plague the current LDS Church are the question of polygamy and controversies over the practice of proxy baptisms for the dead. *Joseph Smith: The Prophet of the Restoration* deals with these issues in directly opposing ways. The doctrine of proxy baptisms is confronted head on and specifically addressed numerous times throughout the film. Characters frequently reference the LDS emphasis on eternal families, speaking of how people can be saved if they die before hearing the truth through proxy rituals. At one point,

Smith says, “It may seem to some a very bold doctrine – a power which binds on earth and in heaven – but God has restored that authority again. In the temple we can receive all the ordinances of salvation, not only for ourselves, but for those who have died without them. If we are faithful all our losses will be made up.”

The film frames this issue in terms of the death of Smith’s elder brother, Alvin, an event which several scholars agree was deeply significant for Smith’s theology.²⁴

Alvin’s death is a tragic loss, one which causes great suffering for Joseph Smith and his family, especially in light of their preacher’s insistence that Alvin is damned because he was not baptized [Figure 7]. Smith’s later revelation in which God tells him that Alvin can be saved through proxy ritual is depicted as almost a kind of reward to the family in exchange for their faithfulness, a “*deus ex machina*” move which appears to suddenly solve not only the family’s personal crisis but the centuries of Christian wrangling over questions of salvation. The resolution of Joseph Smith’s internal struggle on the issue is also a statement attempting to resolve and re-assert the Church’s position on the subject. Proxy ritual is inherently good and kindly meant, a solution rather than a problem.



Figure 7: A young Joseph Smith mourns by the grave of his elder brother, Alvin, as the family preacher insists that the unbaptized cannot be saved.

Joseph Smith: The Prophet of the Restoration deals with the issue of proxy baptism by framing it as a personal family issue and then resolving it as a primary concern of the film; polygamy, on the other hand, is ignored entirely. The omission of polygamy is nearly universal in Church films, so *Joseph Smith* is not an exception, but a reinforcement of the rule. The topic of polygamy never comes up, even though to ignore the considerable impact Smith's teachings and actions in regards to plural marriage is to dramatically rewrite history.²⁵

Instead, the film places a great deal of emphasis on the romantic relationship between Joseph Smith and his first wife, Emma Hale. The film depicts their early courtship and mutual struggles through hardships (such as the loss of their first child). Towards the end of the film, Joseph makes a statement about marriage as the camera lingers on shots of him giving Emma a necklace and dancing with her at a party: "It is the duty of a husband to love, cherish, and

nourish his wife, to honor her as himself, to regard her feelings with tenderness. For she is his flesh and she is his bone.” As Joseph and Hyrum Smith depart for Carthage - a moment which the gap between the character knowledge and the knowledge of the LDS audience makes poignant because the audience realizes the men are going to their deaths – a shot of Joseph’s hand slipping out of Emma’s grasp emphasizes the loving connection between the two [Figure 8]. There is no mention of his other wives or the fact that Emma did not go with Brigham Young and the other Latter-day Saints to Utah, no references to the great divisions polygamy caused within the early LDS community.

The Church has multiple reasons for keeping polygamy at arm’s length, even in fictionalized historical treatments. As LDS scholars and historians such as Armand Mauss, Thomas J. Alexander and others have noted, Mormons gave up polygamy in order to assimilate with mainstream society, to achieve statehood for Utah and to maintain the Church as a legal organization under increasing pressure from the federal government. Disavowal of polygamy was not the only compromise or transition required for Mormons to make progress in achieving mainstream acceptance, but it was a particularly notable one. The distance between the Utah Church and plural marriage is inversely proportioned to the distance between Mormonism and the American religious mainstream. Moreover, as Douglas J. Davies has noted, “the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints needs to affirm monogamy because it is one of the crucial distinctions between it

and the numerous prophetically inspired breakaway groups that regard plural marriage as of the essence of the original revelations to Joseph Smith.”²⁶



Figure 8: Emma clings to Joseph's hand as he departs for Carthage – and, unbeknownst to them, his death.

Accordingly, dealing with polygamy in films depicting the Church's history raises complicated questions about both the Church's past and the Church's present, questions which Church leaders would rather leave aside as they focus on faith-promoting morality tales designed to affirm members' faith and convert non-members to the fold.

Joseph Smith: The Prophet of the Restoration makes use of melodramatic moments – the death of Alvin and the revelation that he can still be saved, the love between Joseph and Emma and their cruel separation – to construct a particular image of the contemporary Church. In this image, the Church is free of scandal and internal conflict, and focused on family values of monogamous, heterosexual love and familial bonds which continue throughout eternity. Joseph

Smith's personal history is re-written and framed in such a way as to work out social issues facing the twenty-first century Church.

Melodrama as Identity Maker: Establishing the Church as Victim-Hero

For many reasons (the full discussion of which is out of the scope of this paper), the LDS Church places a high value on remembering and reliving Church history.²⁷ The Church operates visitors' centers at several historical sites around the United States and encourages members to visit the sites if they are able. Members hear lessons on Church history regularly. Several of the Church's films, like *Pioneers in Petticoats* and *Joseph Smith*, are retellings of various moments in Church history. These films often rely heavily on the key elements of melodrama, most particularly on the importance of the noble suffering of the victim-hero.

Legacy and *The Mountain of the Lord* are two of these historical dramas.²⁸ Both came out in the early 1990s – *Legacy* in 1990 and *The Mountain of the Lord* in 1993. *Legacy* was the first film the Church produced especially for viewing at the Legacy Theater in Salt Lake City and has enjoyed great popularity with Church members. *The Mountain of the Lord*, while having a less dramatic debut, has still proved to be well-liked and frequently viewed.

Legacy tells the story of fictional character Eliza Williams, who joins the Church early in the 1830s and then follows the Church through Ohio, Missouri, Nauvoo, and on to Utah. Like *Joseph Smith: The Prophet of the Restoration*, *Legacy*'s successor, the film is quite episodic in nature, hitting key points in early Church history, such as mob attacks on the LDS settlements of Haun's Mill and Far West, the move to Nauvoo during which many members of the Church fell ill, the building of the Nauvoo Temple and its destruction, and the 1200-mile trek to Utah by wagon. Much of the history is told in a way that emphasizes coincidences of timing, including many moments of 'too late' and 'just-in-time.' Additionally, because any Church members watching the film will already be familiar with the events Eliza and her family live through, there is continually a gap between the audience's knowledge and the characters.' Every time Eliza thinks the Church has found safe haven, the audience knows another bout of mob violence or sickness is around the bend.

The suffering that the LDS audience expects (and even the non-LDS audience might predict) is what drives most of the narrative in *Legacy*. Eliza sees a mob tar and feather a family friend, her brother dies in the attack on Haun's Mill, she almost dies of sickness during the move to Nauvoo (Joseph Smith arrives and miraculously heals her 'just in time'). She does briefly find respite in Nauvoo, and while there she meets and marries another convert, David Walker.

But more trials are to come along the trail to Utah. First, while crossing a dangerous river on a muddy bridge, Eliza's wagon is damaged and Eliza and her family barely escape alive. Then, the United States government requests that eligible LDS men form a battalion to help fight in the Mexican War. David goes because they need the money, and Eliza is left to drive a wagon by herself across the mountains and prairies. During this time, one of her oxen falls ill and it seems as though they will not be able to go forward [Figure 9]. Eliza pleads with God for a miracle, however, and is rewarded for her faith – the ox gets up, and she is able to continue on her journey with the rest of the Church.



Figure 9: Eliza's faith provides for the miraculous healing of her sick ox as she and her family journey to the Salt Lake Valley with other LDS pioneers.

Throughout the film, there is a constant tug-of-war between tragedies and miracles. Church history unfolds as an intensely melodramatic narrative of rapidly shifting highs and lows. Suffering and sorrow are nearly constant, but fortuitous coincidences and last minute rescues are just as plentiful. Eliza, who clearly

serves as a stand-in for the “every-Saint,” is a heroic figure for surviving, for keeping the faith – just as the entire LDS Church is heroic for achieving the same.

The Mountain of the Lord recounts the story of the building of the Salt Lake City temple, which took forty years to complete. The film tells the story in a series of flashbacks through the eyes of fourth Church President Wilford Woodruff as he gives an interview to a fictional reporter, William Callahan, at the time of the dedication of the Salt Lake City temple in 1893. The interaction between Woodruff and Callahan is both a frame and subplot, as Callahan slowly becomes personally as well as professionally interested in the Church. Similar to *Legacy* in many respects, *The Mountain of the Lord* is episodic in nature and the narrative relies heavily on the suffering that went into building the temple, as well as the many coincidences in timing that either pushed the work on the temple forward or held it back.

For instance, just as work on the temple in commencing in 1853, James Livingston, a convert from Scotland who just happens to be an expert stonecutter, arrives. Five years later, when the federal government has sent troops to Utah to put down a non-existent rebellion, the members of the Church must cover the entire foundation with dirt to hide the temple and preserve the sacredness of the grounds. Once that threat has passed, another arises: the stones are cracking and the entire foundation must be taken out and redone. Then, the Union Pacific Railroad asks for LDS men to come and work on the railroad, which they do in

order to facilitate the moving of granite blocks for the temple from the quarry to Temple Square. During the work on the railroad, however, James Livingston is badly injured in an accident. For a time it looks as though he might die, but he miraculously pulls through and is able to continue work on the temple with an artificial arm. These types of occurrences come one right after another in the narrative of the film, though the events span a forty year period, making the building of the temple (like the conversion story of Vincenzo di Francesca in *How Rare a Possession*) appear to be a series of chance encounters, surprise setbacks, and extraordinarily fortuitous saves. Throughout, the suffering of the individual members of the Church and the Church as a whole continually plays a key role.

These melodramatic retellings of Church history can serve not only as history lessons or as entertaining dramas, but as reaffirmations of the Church's status as a victim-hero in and of itself. During the twentieth century, as the LDS Church has gained more and more acceptance in the mainstream and has left behind some of its more distinctive features (such as polygamy – which, as is the case with *Joseph Smith: The Prophet of the Restoration*, goes without mention in both *Legacy* and *The Mountain of the Lord*) it needs to find new ways to understand itself as a unique institution, as claiming an identity as God's chosen "true" church. LDS scholar Terryl Givens has written convincingly on the subject, pointing to a paradoxical tension within Mormonism between a desire for mainstream acceptance and a need to identify as exceptional. Givens argues that

Joseph Smith “imbued an entire people” with a “sense of hostile separation from the world” and points to an LDS understanding that “persecution may be a marker of blessedness.”²⁹ For members of the Church, then, viewing films like *Legacy* and *The Mountain of the Lord* provide a reminder of the shared history of suffering the Church possesses, of the shared identity as victim-hero. For non-members who might see the films, the image of the Church as a whole (and its members individually) as victim-hero could provoke at the least sympathy – and perhaps even spark interest in conversion, given the suggestion of anthropologist Benjamin Pykles that “the pioneers’ accomplishments [are] viewed as evidence of the veracity and divinely sanctioned greatness of the LDS Church.”³⁰ The films depict the early Latter-day Saints as unfailingly noble, pious, and faithful. They are innocent victims of cruel external attacks; their commitment to the Church throughout those persecutions is meant to demonstrate that the Church must be true in order to have earned such devotion from such good people.

In Conclusion: Beyond LDS Melodrama

From *The Mailbox* to *Legacy*, from *Pioneers in Petticoats* to *How Rare a Possession*, LDS films are operating under a melodramatic modality, in part if not in entirety. These films use the key elements of melodrama to strategically accomplish certain goals in line with the LDS moral vision. Though in the interest

of time and space, I have taken these films separately and used them as examples for discrete categories of uses of melodrama, most of the films actually incorporate numerous uses of melodrama. And as Barbara Klinger has pointed out, meaning in film is a “volatile, essentially *cultural* phenomenon that shifts with the winds of time” and I also recognize that LDS films have multiple, fluid meanings.³¹ Though in this paper I highlight certain meanings for LDS film associated with various elements of melodrama, I make no effort to argue that these readings are the “true” or “real” readings – they are only a few of many possible.

It is also important to note that while a melodramatic mode may be undertaken in order to achieve certain goals, such efforts may not always be successful. That is, while melodramatic moments in a film like *Legacy* may prompt tears and a sense of spiritual confirmation for some viewers, those same moments may provoke ridicule or dismissal from other views. Melodrama is a tool, but it cannot work in the same way on every viewer. Indeed, the melodramatic reshaping of LDS history may even work against the filmmakers’ aims when it comes to viewers who are well-informed about early Church history; when melodrama is substituted for historical fact, such viewers may be hostile to the overall messages of the film. In this essay, I have considered how melodrama might succeed, but the deployment of melodrama may backfire, or result in unintended consequences.

Additionally, though this paper has used LDS films as a lens through which to consider the many uses of the melodramatic mode, many other groups or individuals can and do use melodrama similarly – to encourage conversion or promote change, to work out social issues, to establish or to create or maintain a victim-hero identity. The melodramatic mode is fluid and functional. John Mercer and Martin Shingler remind us that melodrama “exists at the very limits of a visual and dramatic medium like cinema; it attempts to articulate those things it is almost impossible to represent – melodrama speaks the unspeakable and represents the unrepresentable.”³² Any group or individual with the need to express a certain vision, one which defies conventional representation (like religious experience), might then find the melodramatic mode helpful, if not necessary. The Latter-day Saint case is simply one example of melodrama on a mission.

¹ John Mercer and Martin Shingler, *Melodrama: Genre, Style, Sensibility* (London: Wallflower, 2004), 95-96.

² I put forward this definition while acknowledging that not all films operating under a melodramatic modality will necessarily include all three and that there may be other elements which have melodramatic causes or effects. This is simply a working definition, open to change and amendment.

³ Mary Ann Doane, “Pathos and Pathology,” *Camera Obscura* Vol. 19, No.3 (2004), 14.

⁴ Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), 29.

⁵ Steve Neale, "Melodrama and Tears," *Screen* Vol. 27, No. 6 (Nov-Dec 1986), 6.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷ Williams, 30.

⁸ Neale, 7.

⁹ For a more in-depth treatment of the history of LDS film, see Randy Astle and Gideon O. Burton, "A History of Mormon Cinema" *BYU Studies* Vol 46, No. 2 (2007).

¹⁰ An LDS 'ward' is essentially a congregation. Wards are delineated geographically, and are usually made up of 200-500 members.

¹¹ See, for instance, Christine Gledhill, "Signs of Melodrama," in *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, Christine Gledhill, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1991). Gledhill argues for the importance of stars in the evolution of the melodramatic mode. While not disagreeing with Gledhill's argument in reference to Hollywood, I wish to make the distinction that outside Hollywood, stars may or may not have the same function or use in melodramatic productions.

¹² Greg Hansen, "Making Movies that Matter: The Church Audio/Visual Department Observations from an Extra," *Meridian Magazine*, 22 march 2006.

¹³ *Mr Krueger's Christmas* was one of the last productions Stewart was involved with, and he evidently had such a good experience that he donated a great deal of his personal collection to Brigham Young University.

¹⁴ Joseph Smith, *The Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), Moroni 10:4.

¹⁵ Joseph Smith, *The Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), Section 9, Verse 8.

¹⁶ Neale 7 and *The Mailbox*, prod. Brigham Young University and dir. David K. Jacobs, 24 min., 1977, videocassette.

¹⁷ *How Rare a Possession*, prod. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, dir. Russell Holt., 1 hr., 4 min., 1987, videocassette.

¹⁸ Neale, 6.

¹⁹ Richard Tice, "How Rare a Possession The Book of Mormon, the Word of God," *Ensign* (January 1988).

²⁰ *Mr. Krueger's Christmas*, prod. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, dir. Kieth Merrill, 26 min., 1980, DVD.

²¹ Neale, 17.

²² David N. Rodowick, "Madness, Authority and Ideology: The Domestic Melodrama of the 1950s," in *Home is Where the Heart Is*, Christine Gledhill, ed. (London: BFI Publishing, 1987), 270.

²³ *Pioneers in Petticoats*, prod. Brigham Young University, dir. Judge Whitaker, 33 min., 1969, videocassette.

²⁴ See Douglas J. Davies, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000) and Samuel Morris Brown, *In Heaven as it Is On Earth: The Early Mormon Conquest of Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²⁵ See Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005) and Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Signature Books, 1997), as well as broader histories of the Latter-day Saint traditions like Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

²⁶ Davies, 254.

²⁷ Douglas Davies suggests, for instance, that "history within Mormonism often plays the role occupied in other religions by theology." *The Mormon Culture of Salvation*, 11.

²⁸ *Legacy*, prod. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, dir. Kieth Merrill, 53 min., 1990, DVD and *The Mountain of the Lord*, prod. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, dir. Peter N. Johnson, 1 hr. 12 min., 1993, videocassette.

²⁹ Terryl Givens, *People of Paradox* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 54 and 56.

³⁰ Benjamin C. Pykles, *Excavating Nauvoo: The Mormons and the Rise of Historical Archaeology in America* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 201), 133.

³¹ Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1994), 159.

³² Mercer and Shingler, 97.

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